



San Juan County has been awarded \$260,200 from Great Outdoors Colorado to advance outdoor recreation, stewardship, and land protection through a boots-on-the-ground approach to meet the San Juan Mountain community's urgent needs and priorities. This effort, called San Juan County Public Lands Stewardship and Visitor Education Project (San Juan Stewardship Project) is the result of a collaborative effort between San Juan County, area non-profits Mountain Studies Institute and San Juan Mountains Association, the Silverton Chamber of Commerce, and the San Juan County Sheriff's Office. This collaborative approach made the project attractive to Great Outdoors Colorado reviewers for funding, stating: "The recreation pressure in this area combined with the demonstrated impacts of unmanaged recreation make this a compelling request. This proposal provides an intriguing balance of employment, public education, science, and stewardship."

The San Juan Mountains experienced an overwhelming increase in visitation and backcountry use in 2020. Growing numbers of visitors to San Juan County are impacting fragile watersheds, irreplaceable high-alpine tundra, and forests already suffering from drought. In past years, up to 200 hikers per day would make the strenuous hike to the turquoise-blue waters and 13,000 ft peaks of Ice Lakes Basin. In 2020, the Ice Lakes Trail averaged an unprecedented 500-650 hikers per weekend day. Over Labor Day Weekend, trailhead monitors observed 1,947 hikers and 215 overnight backpackers. Unfortunately, these growing crowds have damaged the trail and contaminated the watershed with human waste, trash, and toilet paper. This trend has been noted across numerous popular destinations in the San Juan Mountains. San Juan County's 2020 tourist season culminated with a human-caused wildfire at Ice Lakes Basin, one of the region's most beloved places, momentarily threatening the Town of Silverton and requiring an emergency evacuation of 23 hikers.

The San Juan Stewardship Project will include several elements, including support for the Alpine Ranger Program, a Visitor Outreach and Education campaign, and a Citizen Science water quality monitoring program. The Alpine Ranger program will provide a public safety and education presence at outdoor recreation hotspots throughout San Juan County. Funds will be used to support several seasonal Alpine Rangers, as well as provide funding for vehicle maintenance and fuel. Typically, Alpine Rangers patrol the Alpine Loop and other parts of the back country during the high-traffic summer season, but the program has been reduced over the past few years due to funding limitations. Through the Visitor Outreach and Education campaign, several avenues will be pursued to reach visitors, San Juan Mountains Association will continue to host an "education base camp" at the Ice Lakes trailhead, and this will be expanded to other popular hot spots as well, like Highland Mary Lakes and Molas Pass. The Forest Ambassador program will target trailheads to talk with visitors about Leave No Trace principles. A series of videos and outreach materials will be produced for online and in-person outreach. A Wildfire Safety Education Plan and Exhibit is another major focus for outreach, as we will likely see high or extreme fire danger and fire restrictions this summer. Finally, the Citizen Science water quality monitoring will engage community members to learn more about the impacts of recreation on our watersheds. They will be trained to take water samples that will then be analyzed for E. coli. The data collected will be put into outreach materials, which will then be used by the Alpine Ranger program and the Visitor Outreach Campaign.

Outdoor recreation is essential to our local economy, and the San Juan Stewardship Project is our community's best chance at stemming the tide of recreation-related resource damage that has spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic. The San Juan Stewardship Project will promote our community's vitality by enhancing our tourism industry and improving conditions on-the-ground at our most popular outdoor destinations. This effort was made possible through collaboration between local government and local nonprofits working together to address complex issues and create stronger solutions by leveraging complimentary areas of expertise.